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## JEWISH GRAMMARIANS OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

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Biblical exegesis and Hebrew grammar are naturally closely interwoven with one another. While in general the two may and to-day are kept quite distinct, still there are many instances—notably in the thorny field of Hebrew syntax—where the dividing line becomes exceedingly faint, if not entirely wiped out. The bond uniting the two becomes the closer the further back we go, so that, in the period of which these articles treat, it is difficult to separate the Jewish grammarians from the Jewish commentators of the Bible. Works on Hebrew grammar are invariably interspersed, and in general very liberally interspersed, with disquisitions and discussions of a purely exegetical nature, and the interpreter of the biblical text as frequently trespasses on the field of the grammarian.

### I.

The middle of the ninth century, in more than one respect, marks a turning-point in the history of the Jews. The contact with Mohammedan civilization and the rise of Karaism succeeded in inaugurating a new period of intellectual activity among them. Just as some thousand years previous, the meeting of the Jews with Grecian culture in Alexandria resulted in that remarkable product, the Hellenic-Judaic literature, so the encounter with Islam in Spain and on the northern coast of Africa gave rise to a rich and valuable literature. The great schism in the Jewish church ascribed to Aven about the year 850 of the common era, gave the fresh current a *fixed* direction. Whatever else Karaism may in the course of time have become, it was at its origin a reaction against the overweening authority which the Talmud had acquired. The watch-cry of the movement was “Return to the Bible.”

But in thus acknowledging the authority of the Bible alone, Karaism—and this was perhaps its most important result—led to a taking up of a sadly neglected study. The Karaites, as well as the upholders of rabbinical tradition, were forced to study the Bible; the former by the sheer necessity of their principles, the latter in order to furnish themselves with weapons against their opponents. For more than five hundred years the Talmud, to the exclusion of the Bible, had engrossed the thought and attention of the Jews. After the final redaction of the Mishna, in the early part of the third century, the laws embodied in that codex formed the subject of discussion in the various talmudical schools from generation to generation. When about the middle of the fifth century these discussions, constituting the so-called Gemara, were in turn also collected and arranged,

it was now the entire Talmud, i. e., the Mishna and Gemara, which furnished the mental food for the Jews.

The Amoraim (speakers), as those rabbis were termed who lived after the redaction of the Mishna in contradistinction to the Tanaim (teachers), were succeeded by the Saburaim (reasoners), who stood in the same relation to the entire Talmud as the Amoraim to the Mishna. But during all this time, the source of all Jewish tradition, the fountain-head of all laws, ceremonial and otherwise, was neglected. The Mishna took the place of the Bible in the eyes of the Amoraim, and the Talmud in turn was the Bible of the Saburaim—the supreme authority. It was quite natural, therefore, that the Bible itself—and consequently classical Hebrew—was but little studied, since it was but little required. The Talmud was the book of life for the Jews. According to its dictates they regulated their conduct. To the Talmud recourse was had in all cases of doubt, and a decision directly or indirectly derived from it was final. With the advent of Karaism the great change occurred. It is a sufficient proof for the assertion that the Karaitic movement was the direct cause of the revival of the study of Hebrew, that the eminent Rabbi, Saadia, or Saadia Gaon,<sup>1</sup> as he is commonly known, who is the greatest opponent of the founder of Karaism, is also the one with whom the new period takes its rise. It is true there is one who precedes Saadia by a few years, and who well deserves a place by his side, viz., Jehudah Ibn Koreish, but his influence on his cotemporaries was exceedingly limited, and it is only the fact that he was so closely followed by a Saadia that saved him from becoming entirely lost to memory. Still, Koreish must not be omitted among the great commentators and grammarians of the Middle Ages. And since, at any rate, he too is, without question, influenced by Karaism, and thus a product of the times, it is but proper to commence with him, although, as already intimated, and as will be shown still more clearly in the course of these articles, Saadia is the real inaugurator of the new period. We might term Jehuda Ibn Koreish a forerunner of it.

## II.

*Jehuda Ibn Koreish.* As is the case with so many of the men of this period who have left their impress on the course of events, we know but little of the life of Ibn Koreish. Through a notice in a grammatical treatise of the famous Abraham Ibn Ezra,<sup>2</sup> we learn that he was born in Tohart in Morocco. The year of his birth is not known, but from several indications it is clear that he did not live *after* Saadia. Ibn Ezra, in the already quoted passage of Moznaim, which gives a list, chronologically arranged, of prominent Jewish grammarians, indeed places Saadia before Koreish, but this might just as well indicate that Koreish was

<sup>1</sup> Gaon, which is the exact equivalent of the English "Highness," was the title which Saadia bore as the chief of the Talmudical school in Pumbeditha (Babylon).

<sup>2</sup> Moznaim (Preface).

cotemporary with Saadia, and that the latter takes precedence on account of his greater importance. It is probably the safest to place him between 850 and 900. He wrote a book which he called **אב ואם**, "father and mother," probably of a lexicographical character. The work is, unfortunately, lost, so that we can only conjecture from quotations to be found in later writers what it contained. A second work of his, upon which his fame rests, is a "Letter to the Jewish Congregation of Fez." It is a plea for the study of Hebrew. From this alone it is clear that he stands under the influence of the Karaite movement. Indeed Pinsker—an authority on the subject—believes that he was a Karaite; but while there are passages in this letter which may be construed as implying a censure of the Rabbanites, this in itself is not sufficient evidence that he was himself a member of the new party. The way in which Ibn Ezra and Menaḥem ben Saruk, and others who are of the party of tradition, speak of him, makes it very unlikely that he was their opponent in religious views. Ibn Ezra, more especially, who loses no opportunity in dealing a blow at the Karaites, would scarcely have mentioned Jehuda Ibn Koreish at all among the *eminent* grammarians, much less spoken in such terms of praise of him as he does, had he known Koreish to have been one of the "Sadducees" as he ironically terms the Karaites. An important fact which must not be overlooked is that Koreish wrote his letter in Arabic, and that, more than this, he shows the importance of a knowledge of Arabic for the study of Hebrew. He is indeed the first, as far as we know, to advocate the comparison of Hebrew with the cognate tongues, and thus laid the foundation for a method which was perfected by some of his successors. He also urges the congregation in Fez, in the most earnest terms, not to abandon the reading of the Chaldaic translation of the Bible, the so-called Targum—a custom introduced in Palestine when the knowledge of Hebrew could no longer be presupposed among the mass of the population—since the "Syriac," as he calls the dialect of the Targum, is of great importance for the explanation of the Hebrew. The language of the Mishna he also declares to be essential for a thorough training in Hebrew, so that, according to Ibn Koreish, Arabic, Aramaic, and the Mishna, ought to be mastered by every student of the Bible. He then proceeds to substantiate his theory by facts. Numerous instances are given of words which are explained by a reference to their Arabic or Aramaic equivalents, as the case may be. It is interesting to observe that Koreish has already a conception, naturally inexact, of the law of "consonantal transposition between the several Semitic languages. Thus, he shows that a Hebrew Zayin becomes in Aramaic a Daleth, e. g., **זמע** is equivalent to **דמעא**. The whole Risalet—as the Arabic title reads—is divided into three divisions besides the introduction; (a) the explanation of difficult Hebrew words occurring in the Bible, by the aid of the Targum, (b) by the aid of Mishna and also Talmud, and (c) a comparison of the Hebrew with the Arabic. It needs scarcely be said that Koreish's comparative philology is of a very primitive kind. His errors are

frequently of a nature which almost every beginner in Hebrew to-day can verify, but that in no way detracts from his chief merit, which lies in having indicated the way to future investigators. He is still groping in the dark, but he is nearing the right road to a systematic study of the knowledge. It is, of course, impossible to estimate what influence his letter exerted upon the congregation at Fez—with whom he must have stood in high favor—or elsewhere. At any rate, its appearance was a sign of the times, and as such the *Risalet* is not without its importance even to-day. The minds of the Jews had been turned to the Bible through the platform on which Karaism claimed to stand. Jehuda Ibn Koreish showed that the Bible could only be understood—provided the language in which it was written be understood—in the full sense of the word. The fanciful interpretations of the Rabbis and the arbitrary deductions of the Karaites—both doing violence to the spirit of the Hebrew language as well as of the Bible—would vanish before impartial scientific research. This was the profound conviction of Jehuda Ibn Koreish which breathes in the pages of his *Risalet*. With his great successor, however, the study of Hebrew begins in real earnest, and the results of the renewed intellectual activity in this sphere are soon seen in the remarkable progress which was made in the knowledge of Hebrew grammar and lexicography, and with this, in the interpretation of the Bible.